

STRUGGLING TO SURVIVE: LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, AND QUEER/QUESTIONING HOMELESS YOUTH ON THE STREETS OF CALIFORNIA

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INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) individuals represent between five and ten percent of the general youth population, yet they make up 15 to 25 percent of the homeless youth population.¹ Percentages are even higher in certain communities known to offer support and services to the LGBTQ community, such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, where LGBTQ youth represent up to 40 percent of the homeless youth population.²

The purpose of this issue brief is to highlight the challenges faced by LGBTQ homeless youth in California based on an in-depth review of existing research on this population, including a recently released report from the Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership (HHYP),* as well as a series of interviews conducted with LGBTQ homeless youth and service providers

throughout the state. These narratives support the existing research and highlight the policy recommendations found in the literature. The unique and challenging circumstances faced by these youth strongly suggest the need for targeted state policy attention and intervention.

GETTING KICKED OUT



“I had a fight with my mother over my gender identity and sexual orientation, and she put me out, and she instructed all family and friends not to help me out financially, so I hitch-hiked to San Francisco.”
-- Transgender youth, 24, San Francisco³

Youth experience homelessness for a variety of reasons, many of which relate to conflict within the family. Domestic violence, substance abuse, criminal justice involvement, and relationship conflict often compel youth to leave their homes or are factors in

* The Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership (HHYP) report, No Way Home: Understanding the Needs and Experiences of Homeless Youth in Hollywood, presents findings from a comprehensive needs assessment conducted with homeless youth in the Hollywood area of Los Angeles County during 2007 and 2008. Surveys were completed with 389 homeless youth, 19 focus groups were conducted with 137 youth and 53 qualitative interviews were conducted. It is one of the only California specific studies to compare LGBTQ homeless youth with their heterosexual peers, and is therefore cited frequently throughout this report.

why they have been forced to leave.⁴ LGBTQ youth are affected by each of these factors, but conflicts with parents and caregivers around their sexual orientation and/or gender identity add yet another complication in contributing to LGBTQ youth homelessness.

One reason for the overrepresentation of LGBTQ youth in the overall homeless youth community is the rate at which they are pushed out of their homes due to their family's response to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

An estimated 25 to 40 percent of LGBTQ homeless youth report leaving home due to conflicts with family members around their sexual orientation or gender expression.⁵

The HHYP report, for example, found that LGBTQ youth were significantly more likely to report homelessness due to family conflict than their non-LGBTQ peers (62% vs. 46%) and were less likely to be homeless due to family homelessness (5% vs. 10%).⁶ In many circumstances they are explicitly told to leave, and in others they choose to leave home rather than face the verbal or physical abuse of those who are unsupportive of their identity. This volatile family dynamic underscores the increased challenges to family reunification for this segment of the homeless youth population.⁷

“I guess I came out to the wrong people and made my life miserable.” – Lesbian youth, 21, Los Angeles⁸

In addition, research indicates that many LGBTQ youth experience detrimental home lives prior to entering life on the street. LGBTQ homeless youth are more likely than their non-LGBTQ peers to have experienced child abuse while growing up, including physical abuse (58% vs. 47%) and sexual abuse (32% vs. 16%).⁹ LGBTQ youth are 10 percent more likely to have used drugs or alcohol with a parent or guardian before becoming homeless than their heterosexual peers¹⁰ and are 12 percent more likely to have a family member with a severe alcohol or drug problem.¹¹ **The reasons why LGBTQ youth are subjected to higher rates of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and substance abuse in the home are unknown, but one thing**

is clear: this history of trauma contributes to increased negative outcomes for these youth, particularly once they start living on the street.¹²

LIFE ON THE STREETS

“We had been cast away as freaks or had fled from dangerous homes only to emerge into an environment where the hostility and danger were merely less personal than at home.”

– Transgender youth, San Francisco¹³

Not only do LGBTQ youth face greater rates of victimization in their homes, but current research

suggests that they are also exposed to higher rates of victimization while on the streets when compared



with their heterosexual peers. These risks include physical and sexual assault, including hate crimes.¹⁴ LGBTQ youth are more likely than other youth to be robbed (29% vs. 21%), physically assaulted (28% vs. 18%), and sexually assaulted or raped while on the streets (22% vs. 7%).¹⁵ Harassment due to sexual orientation or gender identity contributes to the challenges these youth face. **Thirty-three percent of LGBTQ youth report being a victim of a hate crime since entering life on the street.¹⁶**

“I lived in terror of sexual assault while living on the streets since I had been attacked and abused previously by several different people during childhood and early adolescence.”

– Transgender youth, San Francisco¹⁷

This population more frequently engages in life-sustaining activities that may present a risk to their physical or psychological health than their heterosexual peers, including activities such as exchanging sex for food or shelter, panhandling to provide an income, and illegal camping to obtain temporary shelter.¹⁸ In fact, **LGBTQ youth are more than three times as likely to be involved in survival sex as their non-LGBTQ**



peers, further increasing their exposure to trauma while living on the streets.¹⁹

“Because queer youth can’t get jobs and often don’t have the training to get anything beyond an entry-level position, we are often forced into the street economy which means drug selling and trafficking, sex work and survival sex.”

– Youth Program Coordinator, San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Center ²⁰

LGBTQ youth face a greater number of public health risks when compared with their heterosexual peers. LGBTQ youth report higher rates of hard drug use (cocaine, heroin, and/or methamphetamine) over the course of a year (30% vs. 19%),²¹ including intravenous drug use, which further places this population at risk for diseases such as HIV and hepatitis C. However, research also suggests that LGBTQ homeless youth are more likely to seek substance abuse treatment, and are no more likely to engage in risky behaviors with intravenous drug use, such as sharing needles, than their heterosexual peers.²²

In addition to substance abuse issues, LGBTQ youth also experience higher rates of certain mental health disorders, and suicidal ideation.²³ LGBTQ youth are nearly twice as likely to report having been diagnosed with bipolar disorder as non-LGBTQ youth,²⁴ and are more likely to meet criteria for Major Depressive Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.²⁵ In addition, **LGBTQ youth report significantly higher rates of suicidal thoughts than their heterosexual peers (73% vs. 53%).²⁶**

In short, the disproportionate representation of LGBTQ youth among the overall homeless youth population, as well as the increased risks and negative outcomes these youth face, strongly suggest the need for targeted community and policy action to assist these youth.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

“I wish there were more places for LGBTQ youth to hang out and watch movies and keep us off the streets and have something to eat.”

– Gay male, 20, San Francisco²⁷

When considering policy strategies that will improve the lives of LGBTQ homeless youth, it is important to take into consideration the strengths these youth bring to the table in order to build upon them and improve future outcomes. These policy recommendations emerged from the interview responses of LGBTQ homeless youth, the service providers who work with them and the current literature on this population.²⁸

“In terms of case management, the biggest issue facing this community is sensitive housing. This continues to be a barrier, as do sensitive services in general, but housing is the most pressing issue. There needs to be a gay-friendly attitude and culture, unisex bathrooms, etc.”

–Erin Casey, MSW, My Friend’s Place, Los Angeles

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ Support continued research on the unique characteristics and experiences of LGBTQ homeless youth, including how to address family conflict specific to this population.
- ✓ Prevent homelessness among this population by providing increased support and early intervention programs for families who may be struggling with their child's sexual orientation or gender identity.
- ✓ Increase community awareness of the causes and prevalence of youth homelessness in the LGBTQ population through school and community events such as discussion forums, parent information nights, and other local events.
- ✓ Engage LGBTQ homeless youth in designing appropriate social services and supports that meet the needs of their community.
- ✓ Develop new services such as shelters, drop-in centers, and transitional-living programs to address the needs of all homeless youth, including the needs of the LGBTQ population for safety and acceptance.
- ✓ Create safe social spaces for members of the LGBTQ homeless youth community to interact with each other in positive ways, such as community centers where the youth feel safe and comfortable, and can obtain information and access to services.
- ✓ Encourage members of the larger LGBTQ community to address the issue of LGBTQ youth homelessness by becoming foster parents, or by providing mentorship to these youth.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Those interested in gaining further insight into the experiences of LGBTQ homeless youth, please see *Kicked Out*, an anthology of writings by LGBTQ homeless youth living on the streets.²⁹ Please also see the [Youth Video Wall](#), featuring short video clips by homeless youth in California, on the California Homeless Youth Project website at cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov. See in particular, "Kicked out Because of Sexual Orientation," and "Homeless Youth Finds Sobriety and Stability." There are also a variety of national policy resources that highlight the issue of LGBTQ youth homelessness including, *The National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Homeless Youth*,³⁰ *Incidence and Vulnerability of LGBTQ Homeless Youth*,³¹ and *The Federal Response to Gay and Transgender Homeless Youth*.³²

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Notes

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